Freedom through work: The psychosocial, affect and work

Parisa Dashtipour

Published in Kenny, K. and Fotaki, M. (2014) *The psychosocial and organization studies: Affect at work*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Introduction

While recognizing the value of productive work, some social theorists call for the end of wage-based work because of its exploitative nature (e.g. Gorz, 1999). In parallel with such arguments, this chapter suggests that it is not work itself that needs to be eliminated, but the way in which it is organized and the conditions in which it is conducted. Elaborating on the relationship between work and affect, the chapter shows how work can in fact be a route to freedom. It contributes by recasting both freedom and work as psychosocial processes and thereby demonstrating the empowering and transformative potentials of work.

I begin by briefly reviewing the sociological and critical management literature that show how freedom at work is hampered through mechanisms of control that, ironically, appeal to workers' self-images and aspirations for freedom. I then introduce some terminology from Lacanian psychoanalysis, before briefly illustrating how scholars have utilized Lacan's theory of identification to advance our understanding of control. Subsequently, I illustrate the two ways in which Lacan's theory helps to comprehend the relationship between work and freedom. First, while scholars have revealed the importance of the concept of identification for comprehending control, I emphasize that it also assists in thinking about freedom.

Lacan presents three dimensions of subjectivity and identification (Hook, 2011) as follows: symbolic (the socio-cultural and linguistic order of the Other and the source of recognition), imaginary (likeable body-images of ourselves derived from others) and real (that part of psychosocial life which is not straightforwardly accommodated within the symbolic and the imaginary domain). Expanding on Lacanian organizational scholars, I propose that freedom and emancipation should be viewed in psychosocial terms: as freedom from a search for recognition from the Other, and this is facilitated by the real in work. Second – and this is the central argument of the chapter – a Lacanian perspective can highlight how work can enable freedom because it 'touches' on the real. Dejours and colleagues' clinical approach to work (Dejours, 2007; Dejours and Deranty, 2010) also bring to light the relationship between work and the real. However, I show that Lacan's more sophisticated view of the real as including affect is better suited to understand how work is related to freedom. I redefine work as a signifying, and thus psychosocial, activity that can bring about freedom because it can 'treat' (act upon) the real. Work is then related to freedom in two ways: first, as an activity that converges on the real, it may enable freedom from the pursuit of recognition. Second, as a signifying practice, it can domesticate affect and thus provide a measure of freedom from the real. I use an example from cinema to illustrate some of the theoretical points.

The chapter thus contributes to organizational studies, especially to the literature that draws from Lacan, by advancing the understanding of the relationship between work and freedom. Lacanian psychoanalysis is appropriate because it lends itself well to a psychosocial approach (Hook, 2008). Psychosocial studies is here defined as a perspective that aims to challenge the opposition between the psychological and the

social by viewing these two spheres as each constituting the other (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008).

Contemporary work: self-fulfilment as a vehicle of control

Sociologists and philosophers imply that the highly competitive market-dominated neoliberal society has shaped the world of work in very peculiar ways. Du Gay (1996) claims that today's workers are expected to become 'entrepreneurs of the self' by adapting themselves to the market principles of enterprise and pursue a project of self-branding and self-development. Sennett (2008) implies that images of 'talent' and various forms of individual rewards seduce contemporary workers, and thus personality and the ego is emphasized over an engagement with the quality of work itself. An engagement with work is, according to Sennett (2008), what is involved in craftsmanship, which is defined by its "impersonal character" (p. 27). An authentic commitment to the concrete tasks of the work – that is, with the problems faced by work and with problem solving – is downplayed in a culture where the focus is on the self. The presentation of work as a site where the self can be cultivated echo Giddens' (1991) argument that a reflexive 'project of the self' is a fundamental characteristic of modernity. It also resonates with Lasch's (1980) claim that late capitalism produces individuals characterized by a pathological narcissistic structure and an incessant search for validation.

Some critical management and organization scholars, especially those influenced by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories, repeat these sociological insights. They have written, for example, about the ways in which worker consent to capitalism is generated through ideological discourses that emphasize 'autonomy', 'freedom',

'self-actualization' or 'empowerment' (e.g. Casey, 1995; Willmott, 1993). Such work is a segment of a broader literature that focuses on the way in which 'normative' forms of control use subjectivity as its greatest weapon (see for example, Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Willmott, 1993, 1994). Control functions through the exploitation and manipulation of workers' identities and self-images (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Knights, 2003; Willmott, 1993, 2005). More recently, Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011) have argued that a 'neo-normative' mode of control encourages workers to 'be themselves' and thus produces employee involvement through an illusion of freedom.

Drawing from Lacan's rich vocabulary of subjectivity and identification some organizational theorists have gone some way in illustrating why discourses that appeal to worker's aspirations for identity can manage to embrace workers. In the next section I explain some Lacanian terms, mainly the imaginary, the symbolic and the real before briefly illustrating how researchers interested in control have deployed these concepts.

Control and the search for recognition

Lacan's theory of the subject is extremely vast and complicated and only a short and relatively unsophisticated review of a few of his concepts can be given here (see Stavrakakis (2010) for a more comprehensive overview). Lacan uses three concepts to illustrate the psychosocial constitution of the subject: the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. These three registers explicate different aspects of subjectivity, yet they are linked to each other in an inextricable knot.

The real in Lacan is a complex notion. He variously defines it as the "the impossible" (Lacan, 2004: p. 167), the field which "resists symbolisation absolutely" (Lacan, 1975, p. 66) and the re-emergence of traumatic memories or feelings (Lacan, 2004, p. 55). The real also relates to the *affective*, bodily sphere which is not easily representable (Hook, 2011). The central tenet of later Lacan's theory is the body as an enjoying substance. *Jouissance* – a traumatic, affective pleasure-pain experience that both haunts and drives the subject – is on the side of the real because it relates to the body and it is not easily symbolized, although symbolization is always an attempt to represent the real. The latter is ultimately impossible though, and so the subject suffers from an insurmountable lack. According to Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008, p. 261) "when subjectivity is conceived in terms of lack ... this lack can be understood as a lack of *jouissance*". Symbolic and imaginary identifications, as well as desire, are for Lacan motivated by this lack, which is the mainspring of fantasies of completeness and *jouissance*. The symbolic is the socio-discursive domain; the institutional and linguistic network (the province of duties, roles and obligations) and the values of a given culture, which determines the imaginary. The latter is the field of subjectivity that includes lovable, whole and coherent images of ourselves acquired from others. The imaginary is also the basis of aggressive, narcissistic rivalry (Lacan, 1977). The function of symbolic and imaginary identification is to conceal lack; in our search for *jouissance*, we identify with certain images, ideals or practices in our culture that guarantee wholeness, such as jargons on freedom, pay packages, various forms of consumption practices, and other symbolic markers of status. Symbolic identification is at the same time driven by a "primitive need for recognition and love" from the symbolic Other (Alcorn, 2002, p. 40). Identification is then a psychic mechanism – even as it is also inherently socio-political – driven by dynamics of

recognition and the affective operation of *jouissance* (see also Dashtipour, 2012; Stavrakakis, 2008).

Organizational theorists employ Lacan's concepts in various different ways, but most of them make one key point: neoliberal market-based ideology seduces workers at an affective level by responding to their search for recognition and fulfillment (e.g. Bloom and Cederström, 2009; Ekman, 2012; Hoedemaekers, 2009; Kenny, 2012; Roberts, 2005). Workers identify with ideological discourses of individuality, grandiosity, self-development, 'talent' or 'potential' in their pursuit of recognition. Glynos (2008) understands discourse as the mainspring of ideological fantasies that stage an imaginary state of fullness and that are significant in the upholding or transformation of work-place practices and identities. Identification with such discourses is affective – hence in order to understand how workers are influenced by power in organizational settings, affect cannot be disregarded (Bloom and Cederström, 2009; Stavrakakis, 2008).

In this chapter, I draw on Lacan to suggest something different to these scholars. I propose that Lacanian theory does not only advance our understanding of control, but it can also contribute to a theory of work and freedom. As will be shown below, freedom could be seen as existing beyond a search for recognition and imaginary identifications.

Freedom as beyond recognition

The Lacanian and other organizational literature on control risk presenting workers as forever trapped in incessant strivings for recognition and as little else but a product of

technologies of power (for a critique of the poststructuralist approaches to control, see for example Gabriel (1999)). This leads to the question of how to conceptualize freedom in ways that does not reduce it to an effect of ideology, while bearing in mind the hollow manner in which capitalism deploys this concept.

The work of some Lacanian organizational scholars suggests that freedom should be viewed as linked to processes of identification and recognition. In so far as the socio-ideological sphere animates such processes, and in so far as they create dependencies and various forms of socio-psychological and material enslavements and symptoms, freedom could be understood in terms of freedom from a search for recognition. Lacanian scholars have gone some way in conceptualizing a theory of freedom that is attentive to psychosocial dynamics of identification and recognition. They have capitalized on Lacan's insistence that subjects are never fully determined by discourse or by the social (Stavrakakis, 2008) and that identification is never really successful. Roberts (2005) argues that "to document […] micro processes of self-preoccupation also offers sight of what such processes occlude or foreclose" (p. 638), suggesting thus that freedom lies in the failures inherent in identity. Similarly, Driver (2009a; 2009b) proposes that if we recognize that identification processes in work organizations are inherently fragile and frequently disrupted, we can see how they can also create new possibilities for relating to others. By studying the gaps in workers' narratives, she shows how workers draw on the dominant imaginary 'stress' discourse to construct their identities, but also to "experience themselves as powerful and free" (Driver, 2012, p. 1). She found liberation and emancipation in moments where identity broke down. Hoedemakers (2010), drawing on Lacan's notion of the real (here understood as the limitations in representation), analyses failures in workers'

identification with images of the 'ideal employee'. Focusing on the limitations of identification, he argues, "might be a step towards collective forms of re-signification…[which] might only be possible when entrenched meanings are first unsettled, and when a transcendental self is no longer presupposed" (p. 391). Glynos (2008) raises similar issues by discussing the possibilities of workplace subjectivities that transcend the logic of ideological fantasy. He argues that rather than being defined by an ideological logic, a more open relation to workplace practices is defined by an ethical logic, which "entails risking the loss of one's identity and moving away from trying to capture a lost or new paradise" (Glynos, 2008, p. 19). The scholars imply that freedom entails being liberated from the lures of identification as belonging to both the realm of the imaginary illusions and the injunctions of the symbolic order; freedom is present in the moments that surpass the desire for recognition. This is the moment where the Other is realized as lacking the capacity to provide total fulfillment or secure identity. Freedom is then facilitated or enabled by the real, which is the register that makes apparent the holes in the socio-symbolic realm. From such a psychosocial perspective, freedom is not viewed as some idealized, non-subjective state. It is rather understood as a subjective experience firmly grounded in the psychosocial world in which the subject exists.

We have so far stated that freedom can be viewed as freedom from a search for recognition and this is enabled by the real. But what precisely is this real? I propose that there is a 'real' to the concrete practice of work that can enable freedom from imaginary identifications. This is in contrast to some Lacanian organizational theorists who state that "work is nothing but work" (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007, p. 363). Although I agree with Arnaud and Vanheule that work may not ultimately address the

lack of the subject, my claim is that it can permit the subject to acknowledge the lack in the Other and relinquish a search for recognition and identity. Freedom, then, can be found through work, in so far as it relates to the activity of 'doing' and therefore surpasses a preoccupation with 'being'. This entails an affective investment in the activity of work – its problems and solutions – rather than with the 'self-images' associated with work. This notion parallels with the perspective of French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Christophe Dejours and his colleagues who are part of the 'psychodynamics of work' movement, an approach that has been developed in the last 40 years in the *Centre National des Art et Métiers*. One of their most valuable arguments is that recognition can be viewed in at least two ways: a) recognition connected to the social status of work, and b) recognition of the actual work done by the worker (Dejours and Deranty, 2010). They imply that the latter form of recognition, founded on the 'doing', rather than the 'being' of the subject, is "based on the quality of the relationship that the worker has maintained with the "real"" (p. 172). The real refers to the "obstructing materiality" (Dejours and Deranty, 2010, p. 171) entailed in actual work. In other words, to realize a concrete work task, the subject confronts problems and interruptions that need to be overcome and this is fundamentally an affective experience. Before explaining Dejours's notion of the real and its limitations in more detail, we first need to clearly define what we mean by work.

What is work?

Different academic disciplines have very different understandings of what work is. Work defined as a wage contract is common in the literature. Some also view work or labour as historical categories with changing meanings (Rössel, 2007). Sayers (2005),

however, implies that Marx remains one of the few philosophers who have commented at length on the human aspect of work. He stresses that for Marx, work is an exclusively human activity that shapes the material and social world. Marx strongly advocates work as a formative activity and views it as a route to freedom (Sayers, 1998, chapter 4). Marx, following Hegel, insists that by working on and transforming the natural world we come to recognize our powers because we see ourselves in the product of our work; we objectify ourselves and get to know ourselves in our activity and work.

Taking these ideas into consideration means that work is not purely a political category (see Fleming and Mandarini, 2011). Dejours and Deranty suggest the following definition of work, drawn from the feminist sociologist Danièle Kergoat. Kergoat (2001) states that

> by work, we do not just mean waged labour or work as a profession, but rather work as 'production of life'…this concept of work includes not just professional work (whether paid or unpaid, market or non-market, formal or informal), but also domestic work (in Dejours and Deranty, 2010, p. 173).

Dejours and his colleagues use this definition but they also expand on it, deploying their clinical perspective. What is useful about their clinical viewpoint is that it brings attention to the psychosocial and subjective nature of *working*:

> Work is what is implied, in human terms, by the fact of working: gestures, know-how, the involvement of the body and the intelligence, the ability to analyse, interpret, and react to situations. It is the power to feel, to think, and to invent. In other words, for the clinician, work is not above all the wage relation or employment but 'working', which is to say, the way the personality is

> involved in confronting a task that is subject to constraints (material and social) (Dejours, 2007, p. 72).

Work is from this perspective not understood in abstract non-subjective, non-material ways. Rather, it is viewed as the practice of working – or we could also say organizing – an action on the environment that requires bodily effort and the deployment of subjectivity. Barley and Kunda (2001) argue that organization studies has focused too much on abstract theorizing and needs to return to the question of what work is, that is, the concrete activities that constitute work. They raise a significant point, but as will be clear in what follows, to understand how work can be associated with freedom, we cannot neglect its psychosocial nature, that is, how work is simultaneously a social and a psycho-affective process. I thus follow Barley and Kunda in prioritizing the situated activities of work, but I divert from their perspective by paying specific attention to the link between working and social and affective dynamics. The latter cannot be simply 'observed', but requires the introduction of theory. Barley and Kunda's 'return to work' claim implies a focus on activities and practices; the 'visible' aspect of work. But as Dejours (2007) argues, "the essence of work does not belong to the visible world" (p. 77). In particular, it is not a straightforward matter to observe, quantify or precisely determine the affective suffering entailed in concrete work activities. With affect I am here not alluding to the affect involved in the pursuit of symbolic recognition (Stavrakakis, 2008); in the subject's search for 'being'. Rather, following Dejours affect refers to the suffering associated with the real practice – the 'doing' – of work. Suffering is "absolute affectivity" (Dejours, 2007, in Deranty, 2008, p. 452) which is integral to work.

Work, the real and affect

Dejours and his colleagues offer a theory of work and subjectivity that helps to gain an insight into how working may be related to freedom because it touches on the real. Although Dejours, like Lacan, draws from Freudian theory, his use of the term real does not necessarily have any Lacanian connotations (Deranty, 2010, p. 184), but there are minor similarities between the Lacanian and Dejours's real and I point these out in the next section. In this section, I illustrate Dejours's notion of the real and how it helps us to begin to understand the relationship between work and affect.

Dejours employs the word real to mean anything that interrupts the accomplishment of a work task according to given instructions. This may include fatigue, insufficient skills/experience or the occurrence of unexpected events (for example, breakdowns of machines, tools, materials and systems, or disruptions that arise due to other colleagues, bosses or subordinates). The real implies "the experience of the world's resistance" (Dejours and Deranty, 2010, p. 171). For Dejours "to work is, first, to experience the real, that is to say, experience the breakdown of technical know-how" (Dejours and Deranty, 2010, p. 170). Technical know-how includes formal knowledge and guidance about how to conduct a work task. These never manage to account for everything that is involved in the actual 'doing' of work; they always fail to capture the actual experience of work, which entails moments of interruptions and blockages. "There is always a gap between the prescriptive and the concrete reality of the situation…*working* thus means *bridging the gap* between prescriptive and concrete reality" (Dejours, 2007, p. 72). Dejours suggests that work consist of two different dimensions. The first is the social demands, instructions and prescriptions and the second is the objective world, which manifests itself as "resistance of the real"

(Deranty, 2008, p. 452). Work is a subjective activity that aims to overcome this resistance and close the gap between the prescriptive and objective reality. In short, the notion of the real used here is any material or social force that "exerts resistance to the accomplishment of a task" and almost all types of work entails this resistance (Deranty, 2008, p. 451).

In order to complete a task – or to put it more precisely, in order to conquer the resistance – the subject needs to apply effort. This subjective investment demanded by work is an *affective* experience: the confrontation with the real involves an "affective suffering" (Dejours, 2007, in Deranty, 2008, p. 452). Deranty (2008) states that work "always tests the subject's capacities, it touches precisely the essential vulnerability of the human agent" (p. 451-452). This formulation of work goes beyond common definitions of work as a socio-economic contract, and designates it as first and foremost a subjective and affective process. The real implies that the subject will at first fail to accomplish a work task according to the prescribed manuals and this causes affective suffering. But to overcome suffering, failure must be experienced intimately; the worker must 'own' its failure, and come to terms with it. This is a repetitive process, of failing and starting again. This repetition produces

> an intimate familiarization with the reality of work, via an obstinate, bodily confrontation with the obstructing materiality defining the reality of the task at hand: with the tools, the technical objects and rules, but also the inter-personal condition framing the task (with the clients, the other colleagues, the hierarchy). As a result, the determination to find a way, to fail and yet start all over again, which is the necessary condition for the realization of the task, is also a way of touching the world, in a direct physical sense as well as in the metaphorical

> sense of getting to know it better, and thus of appropriating it (Dejours and Deranty, 2010, p. 171).

The attempt to overcome the suffering entailed in work, if successful, results in the "subjectivation of the real of work" (Dejours and Deranty, 2010, p. 170). This requires the deployment of subjective capacity: an inventive 'practical intelligence'. Affective suffering is over once 'ideas' are invented that enable the subject to find a solution to the problems faced by work. If the real of work is too powerful, which can be due to technological impediments or to social and organizational factors (excessive expectations, for example), then the subject will remain suffering. But if the real is not too obtrusive, then work can lead to the expansion of new subjective powers. "We can say that the embodied confrontation with the real of work allows the subject to appropriate not just the world, but also its own body and thus itself" (ibid, p. 171).

The value of Dejours's theory is that it shows how work is fundamentally an affective encounter with the real, and this highlights the transformative potential of work: overcoming affective suffering is an emancipatory experience. But Dejours adopts a restricted definition of the real: as the obstacles and difficulties that the subject has to confront while carrying out a task. While this is undoubtedly a valuable insight, the notion of affective suffering and how the subject can overcome it are insufficiently theorized. Dejours's theory implies that affective suffering is on the side of the subject, while the register of the real is not. The real is rather the force of the objective. The subject appropriates the real (as the 'resistance of the world') as he or she overcomes suffering. To arrive at a better understanding of how work may be a route to freedom, however, we need a more advanced theory of the real. While Dejours does mention that peer recognition of the subject's work (the practical

intelligence and the creativity deployed to perform a task) is necessary for the overcoming of suffering, it is unclear what precisely 'practical intelligence' is. I suggest that Lacan's more expansive theory of the real helps to address these limitations and advance our understanding of work and freedom.

Work as domestication of affect

The main contributions of Lacan's notion of the real are the following: First, the real for Lacan entails affect, which is a factor at the level of the body, escaping full incorporation into language. Second, Lacan understands the real as in a dialectical relationship with the symbolic. Third, the real – although it is a universal feature of human life – is also very specific to each individual's traumatic history. I elaborate on each of these in what follows.

The Lacanian real refers to that which resists symbolization. In some ways, this parallels with Dejours's notion of the real as presenting a gap between prescriptive and concrete reality in work. But the Lacanian perspective would designate the 'prescriptive' as the operation of the symbolic – that element of work that has been put into representation and been made comprehensible or manageable – and this helps to shed more light on what precisely is the real in work. The real is thus the concrete problems, puzzles or situations that subjects are confronted with at work and that are not symbolized. For example, a doctor deals with disease, a cleaner tackles dirt, and a researcher is faced with a research enigma. In all types of work, there is thus an element that escapes the field of symbolic meaning or comprehension. The object of work, which is that which the subject confronts while working, resists symbolization. Although it is the object or the aim of work, it is not necessarily part of the 'objective

world', completely external to the subject. As that which escapes the symbolic, the real is both objective and subjective (Stavrakakis, 2007 p. 69). The The real is therefore also the affective suffering experienced by the subject at work. For Lacan, the realm of affect is simultaneously a subjective and objective element, and in contrast to Dejours, it clearly belongs to the real because affect is essentially beyond the symbolic. Affect for Lacan (as opposed to emotion) is real in the sense that it is on the side of the drive and cannot be directly represented in language, even though we continuously try to domesticate or organise the excessive elements of affect by giving it a meaning, putting it in a symbolic space (Shepherdson, 2008; see also Hook, 2011). Affect indicates the brute materiality of bodily or traumatic experience, which simultaneously thrills and pains the subject. This suggests that affect and *jouissance* should be seen as synonymous because as Fink (1999) states: "where there is affect, there is *jouissance*" (p. 212). Work touches on the real, precisely because it deals with something that is beyond symbolic meaning and which engenders real affective suffering in the subject. The real is therefore not necessarily something that exists in the objective world, and which the subject then appropriates, which Dejours and his colleagues seem to suggest. Rather, work brings about a situation where the subject gets in touch with the real as something that resist symbolization and produces real *jouissance*.

Despite being non-symbolizable, the Lacanian real is thus always understood in relation to the symbolic. The symbolic is the storehouse or the 'treasury' of signifiers (Lacan, 1977). Signifiers are fundamental in human beings' relations to the world and they facilitate our relationship to the real; they help to give order and coherence to the real and assist in making sense of the incomprehensible. Work, which is a habitual,

social and organizational action, should be understood as a symbolic, signifying practice. The bodily and mental practices of work are signifying practices; they carry and produce meanings. Lacan states that praxis "places man in a position to treat the real by the symbolic" (2004, p. 6). In as much it involves language and practice – that is, the symbolic – work is a way of 'treating' the real, which is to say that it aims to make sense of it and abate affective suffering. Dejours's notion of 'practical intelligence' should be understood as symbolic resources, which are the skills, concepts and experiences that the worker draws from the socio-cultural world while working. It is thus the symbolic that enables the overcoming of what Dejours calls failure (the real). From a Lacanian perspective then, what inhibits the overcoming of suffering is not the excessive force of the real, but inadequate symbolic resources or a damaging symbolic environment. This may include inadequate technology, an excessively competitive environment and unreasonable images of success. Organizational factors or the organizational context are thus equal to the symbolic environment or symbolic resources that are at the subject's disposal. To put it simply: the symbolic organizational context can either facilitate or frustrate the subject's attempt to overcome real affective suffering involved in work. In an enabling symbolic environment, work – as a signifying practice – may domesticate (overcome or manage) real affective suffering and may bring about a measure of freedom from the real. But how precisely is work capable of this?

First, work involves organization, communication and socialization. These are the operation of signifiers, and we know from Lacan that signifiers are an attempt to represent the real or the impossible. Thus, organization, communication and socialization are attempts to symbolize the real and thereby convert feelings of

impossibility into possibility, finitude into infinitude, limitation into potential. This is one of the ways in which work can be understood as intimately related to freedom because it manipulates the real as the impossible. It articulates the impossible and thus turns it into the possible. Work entails crafting, maintaining or transforming structure in the field of affect; it involves an attempt to form the real via signifiers. The argument here is not that work can symbolize the real in its entirety because this is unachievable. The real is unrepresentable, but this does not mean that subjects stop attempting to put it into representation. This is precisely the function of clinical psychoanalysis, which – using speech as its technique – "is a means of working on the real with symbolic means" (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 96). Second, work may entail the domestication of anxiety, which is, for Lacan, the affect of the real. Most types of work, even housework, are organized, in the sense that they involve a number of tasks that are prioritized and timed, and this order may help 'manage' anxiety. Non-work or inactivity, for example, can cause anxiety partly because the subject is in this condition confronted with the real of time: with time as unstructured. Work is a means through which the subject can structure – and thus endure – the real of time. It can therefore establish a 'sense of order' and a time structure, the absence of which is often felt as a major cause of anxiety for the unemployed (Hayes and Nutman, 1981). Given that work involves symbolic and signifying practices, it also affords subjects a means of 'domesticating' the affects caused by trauma. Trauma is very specific to each individual's biographical history and it implies affects (*jouissance*) that keep reappearing and that create a blockage for the subject (Lacan, 2004). This point is explained further in the example below.

Work, the psychosocial and film

To illustrate some of the points above more concretely it helps to use an example from cinema. This approach follows other scholars who view fiction and popular culture as valuable resources for organizational studies (Czarniawska, 1999; Höpfl, 2002; Islam and Zyphur, 2006; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Linstead; 2003; Patient et al., 2003; Phillips, 1995; Rhodes and Lilley, 2012). Cultural representations contain widely shared meanings about work and organization (Rhodes, 2002). Cultural and literary representations also include a significant source of knowledge about what it is to be human and thus they are "an embodiment of knowledge about organizations" (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008, p. 5). Rhodes and Westwood (2008) emphasize that cultural representations do not only bring to light the values and practices of work that much of organization studies neglect but they can also provide access to parts of organizational life that researchers may find difficult to enter or experience. Indeed, fictional representation such as film can deepen our understanding of the affective and lived experience of work. Such modes of representation should be taken seriously especially by researchers interested in the psychosocial aspects of work, as they can help to comprehend how work and organization are hooked to affects, fantasies, desires and anxieties which are 'hidden', not readily evident in interviews and ethnographic studies. Using fiction can also avoid some ethical problems that can accompany the employment of psychoanalytic theory in academic research, such as the essentialisation, pathologisation and disempowerment of interview participants (see Parker, 2005, p. 108).

Work, affect and freedom in *Sunshine Cleaning*

The film *Sunshine Cleaning* (2008) directed by Christine Jeffs is a story about Rose Lorkowski, a single mother in her thirties who suffers from a sense of underachievement. She is going through financial hardship, holding low-paid, embarrassing work as a maid, while trying to get a more respectable position in real estate. She needs a better job, not only to send her son to a better school, but also to gain recognition and approval from her previous classmates who lead successful middle-class lives. She is also having a love affair with Mac, a married family man who does not seem to have any plans to leave his wife. One day, however, Rose decides to jump on the opportunity to launch a crime-scene cleanup business with her sister, which turns out to be both lucrative and significant in helping her change her life. Despite the humiliating activity of cleaning up suicide and murder sites, Rose slowly appears more in harmony with herself.

This job enabled her to gain freedom from a search for recognition. How did it accomplish this? The work involved a confrontation with blood, dirt and mess – this is a confrontation with the real: there is a materiality to blood, dirt and mess that brings about visceral reactions in the subject; they arouse affective suffering. Through work, however, Rose deploys symbolic recourses – cleaning tools, relationship with suppliers and other stakeholders, knowledge about biohazard removal and post-mortem procedures and so on – to clear up the mess and thus control this affective reaction. This is why work should be understood as signifying, symbolic activity: because it functions to manage the real. But it is also symbolic because it has a meaningful impact on the subject beyond the immediate work situation. In Rose's case, cleaning up messy spaces – and thereby managing her affective suffering as she

manages the physical environment – made her recognize her own bodily and mental powers, powers which she could transfer to – and put into use in – other areas of her life. This helped Rose dealing with the feeling of failure and gaining a sense of empowerment. Having struggled most of her adult life with a feeling of being useless – she says to the cleaning-supplies sales man "there is not a lot that I am good at" – her new job made her feel competent. But this was not a search for recognition. After the commencement of her business, she was able to cut herself loose from a search for recognition; she relinquished her desire to obtain a more high status job in the real estate sector to impress her previous classmates and she stopped seeking love from an unavailable man. In other words, the things she used to think of as sources of fullness began to lose their appeal. One scene in particular skillfully demonstrates how her work, despite being shameful and beyond offering financial security, helped her move beyond a search for recognition. She is at the baby-shower party of a woman with whom she went to high school. While arriving at the party, she seems to feel self-conscious and inadequate when she notices the expensive-looking cars parked outside the house. While at the party however, this sense of unease has disappeared. This is apparent when a few former high school friends stare at her mockingly when she tells them about her job. Although at first she seems nervous about what they think, she then states in a calm and collected voice:

> we come into people's lives when they have experienced something profound…and sad. They've lost somebody. You know […] And we help. In some small way…We help.

But Rose's work did not only enable a freedom from the search for recognition: it also helped her move beyond a traumatic past. As stated above, the real is also the re-emergence or persistence of traumatic memories and affects. After Rose and Norah

begin their new work, the viewer is exposed to a series of sporadically appearing scenes, representing a traumatic memory, in which a much younger Rose and Norah find their mother dead in the bathroom, having committed suicide. These memories, lurking behind the events that unfold, should be interpreted as the real for Rose; they are the traumatic past that persist and that bring about affective suffering. The sisters' job had a role to play in stirring up memories of the suicide and the affects linked to it; their work touched the real. This does not however get in their way. In fact, her work helped Rose deal with – or indeed heal – the past and the affective suffering associated with it. This becomes evident after their first job assignment when Rose, who seems unaffected by Mac's pity for her, tells him: "It was disgusting, the smell was just bad. And I can't really describe it. But you know we…we took all that stuff away and we made it better. You know, we made it right". This signifying statement could be read as presenting her job as crucial in acting as a remedy for the recurring suffering caused by her trauma. Cleaning up after dead people was for Rose a signifying activity that touches on the real; it was a way of symbolizing, or 'taming', the affective suffering associated with her mother's death. In some ways her work 'made it right'; it helped her 'clean up after' – and thus move on from the effects of – the trauma of the suicide. We can deduce that her new business enabled her to put an impasse or a traumatic deadlock, into articulation. Cleaning up after dead people, degrading as it was, signified 'cleaning up after' her own mother's death; it represented for her a break with the past and a freedom from affective suffering. One can infer that each time she was exposed to death at work, her own mother's death was repeated. Through her work this repetition was however incorporated within a signifying activity. This symbolization means that the traumatic *jouissance* associated with her mother's death no longer 'insisted' in the same way; work enabled a

different way of relating to her suffering. Her work provided Rose a method of tackling the trauma head-on by helping to symbolize the previously unsymbolizable affects associated with it.

Discussion and conclusion

Rose's work emancipated her from a search for recognition. One can object that the kind of emancipation that Rose seeks is different from the emancipation discussed by the above-mentioned organization scholars who refer to emancipation from oppressive discourses in work organizations. However, it is wrong to assume that such discourses are confined to the organizational context. As highlighted by the sociologists mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, images of talent, self-actualization and success are widespread in today's society. Such discourses call upon all of us to seek recognition and fulfillment by embarking on a 'project of the self' through work. We saw in the film that Rose stopped identifying with these discourses and this was enabled by work. The example showed that while the socio-ideological sphere defines work as 'being', the subject might find freedom by redefining work as 'doing' – as an activity that deals with the real. Rose work confronted her with the real – with affective suffering entailed in both the immediate work situation and her past trauma. Through the signifying activity of work, she was able to gain a measure of freedom from the real. In sum, Rose's work emancipated her from a search for recognition *and* it provided a measure of freedom from the real. This example thus illustrates how a Lacanian perspective can reveal the two ways in which work can bring about freedom.

The chapter has contributed to the development of new psychosocial approaches to work in the following ways. First, it has added to organization studies' theorization of freedom by building on Lacanian perspectives to propose a psychosocial understanding of freedom. Freedom is the moment where the subject relinquishes a search for recognition and breaks free from imaginary identifications. Second, it has highlighted the intimate relationship between work, affect and freedom. One implication of conceptualizing work as signifying activity is that it brings attention to the psychosocial nature of concrete work activities: in work elements from the social world (such as language) is deployed to structure or modify the psycho-affective world. This demonstrates the emancipatory potentials of work. The ideas proposed in this chapter concur with Barley and Kunda (2001) in claiming that we need to pay attention to the localized, lived realities of work. However, I claimed that to arrive at a more advanced understanding of how the lived realities of work are related to emancipation, we need to recast freedom and work as psychosocial and we need to take affect into consideration. Organizational literature on control points out how the social order defines work. This chapter nevertheless highlighted the possibility of freedom through the subject's confrontation with – and domestication of – the affective suffering entailed in concrete work activities.

By emphasizing work as a means to freedom, this chapter puts into question the idea that non-work may be the most radical form of freedom (see Fleming and Mandarini, 2011). It is not necessarily work in itself that is alienating; it is the conditions under which it is carried out, including the discourses that oppress workers, providing them with empty self-images and encouraging them to search for recognition and

fulfillment. What is required is not an abolishment of work, but a different relation to it.

This is not to deny that contemporary organizations limit the possibility to develop the type of real relation to work discussed in this chapter. It becomes difficult to find freedom in the activity of work when the tasks are menial or when employees are put under ever-increasing pressure. The claims made above acknowledge how freedom is either facilitated or frustrated by the socio-symbolic environment. If the environment encourages aggressive imaginary rivalry, the possibilities to find freedom through work become limited. Most of the subject's efforts are in such circumstances invested in competing with others. Workers may however find freedom in the concrete activity of work, even within dominating circumstances. For example, rather than identifying with the phantasmatic enterprise discourse (Jones and Spicer, 2005) workers may identify with the real work entailed in enterprise. Marx recognized that work can be liberating even in a capitalist system; work in this system has alienated workers, yet it has also "meant for them an unprecedented expansion of their horizons and consciousness, of their social relations, of their sphere of activity and hence of their real freedom" (Sayers, 1998, p. 82).

It may well be the case that identification with the task is more achievable in some lines of work than others. And we may even point to the importance of taking into account the questionable ethics of certain tasks. But identification with the 'doing' of work, rather than with 'being', may actually encourage ethical responsibility. We saw that when Rose shifted her energies from seeking recognition to the concrete activities of work, she was not only able to take responsibility for her *jouissance* – or her

'cause', to use Lacanian terminology – she also realized the responsibility she has towards others; she became attentive to the impact of her work on other people. This resonates with Roberts (2005) who states that

> I can identify not with who I am as the world reflects my 'substance' back to me but rather with what I do and its consequences. Such consequences are to be understood not reflexively in terms of the consequences of action for how I will be seen, but rather in terms of the consequences of my actions for others whom I am now willing and able to acknowledge my dependence upon and my unavoidable practical interdependence with. Such conduct is not defensively bound to the other in the way that resistance is often bound to control, but instead involves a radical taking rather than displacing of responsibility (Roberts, 2005, p. 639).

We could thus state that by freeing subjects from imaginary identifications, work as 'doing' facilitates ethical responsibility. As suggested by Dejours and Deranty (2010) work involves "learning to live together" (p. 175); not only because it always establishes, upholds or transforms social relationships, but also because it draws attention to the end product of concrete activities, and therefore opens up the possibility for workers to reflect on the impact of their work on other people. The challenge is how to create organizations that facilitate such reflection and how to encourage work that allows for the expression of subjectivity through what Sennett (2008) refers as the impersonal process of craftsmanship, rather than through status markers, such as flamboyant titles and extravagant promises about success, wealth and recognition. As a starting point, we may look for spaces where such work is already being carried out.

References

Alcorn, M.W. (2002) *Changing the subject in English class: Discourse and the constructions of desire*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Alvesson M and Robertson M (2006) The best and the brightest: The construction, significance and effects of elite identity in consulting firms. *Organization* 13(2): 195–224.

Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (2002) Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(5), 619-644.

Arnaud, G. and Vanheule, S. (2007) The Division of the subject and the organization: A Lacanian approach to subjectivity at work. *Journal of Organizational Change Management,* 20(3): 359–69.

Barley, S. R. and G. Kunda. (2001) Bringing work cack in. *Organization Science* 12: 76–95.

Bloom P and Cederström C (2009) 'The sky's the limit': Fantasy in the age of market rationality. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 22(2): 159–180.

Casey, C. (1995) *Work, self and society: After industrialism*. London: Routledge.

Czarniawska, B. (1999) *Writing management: Organization theory as a literary genre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dashtipour, P. (2012) *Social identity in question: Construction, subjectivity and critique*. London: Routledge.

Dejours, C. (2007) Subjectivity, work and action. In Deranty, J.P., Petherbridge, D., Rundell, J. and Sinnerbrink, R. (eds.) *Recognition, work, politics: New directions in French critical theory*. Leiden: Brill.

Dejours, C. and Deranty, J.P. (2010) The Centrality of work. *Critical Horizons*, 11(2): 167-180.

Deranty, J.P. (2008) The as precarisation of existence. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11(4): 443–463.

Deranty, J. P. (2010) Work as transcendental experience: Implications of Dejours' psycho–dynamics for contemporary social theory and philosophy. *Critical Horizons*, 11(2): 181-220.

Driver, M. (2009a) Struggling with lack: A Lacanian perspective on organizational identity. *Organization Studies,* 30(1): 55–72.

Driver, M. (2009b) Encountering the arugula leaf: The failure of the imaginary and its implications for research on identity in organizations. *Organization* 16(4): 487–504.

Driver, M. (2012) The stressed subject: Lack, empowerment and liberation. *Organization*. 19.

du Gay, P. (1996) *Consumption and identity at work*. Sage: London.

Ekman, S. (2012) Fantasies about work as limitless potential: How managers and employees seduce each other through dynamics of mutual recognition. *Human Relations*.

Fink, B. (1995) *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fink, B. (1999) *A clinical introduction to Lacanian psychoanalysis: Theory and technique*. London: Harvard University Press.

Fleming, P. and Mandarini, M. (2011) Towards a worker's society? New Perspectives on work and emancipation. In Alvesson, M. Bridgman, T. and Willmott, H. *The Oxford handbook of critical management studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Accessed online: oxfordhandbooks.com

Fleming, P. and Sturdy, A. (2009) "Just be yourself": Towards neo-normative control in organizations? *Employee Relations*, 31(6): 569-583.

Flemin, P. and Sturdy, A. (2011) 'Being yourself' in the electronic sweatshop: new forms of normative control. *Human Relations*, 64(2): 177-200.

Frosh, S. and Baraitser, L. (2008) Psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. *Psychoanalysis, culture and society*, 13: 346–365.

Gabriel, Y. (1999) Beyond happy families: a critical reevaluation of the control-resistance-identity triangle. *Human Relations*, 52: 179–203.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Glynos J (2008) Ideological fantasy at work. *Working paper in ideology in discourse Analysis*, 23: 1–22.

Glynos, J., and Stavrakakis, Y. (2008) Lacan and political subjectivity: Fantasy and enjoyment in psychoanalysis and political theory. *Subjectivity*, 24, 256–274.

Gorz, A. (1999) *Reclaiming work*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Hayes, J. and Nutman, P. (1981) *Understanding the unemployed: the psychological effects of unemployment*, London: Tavistock.

Hoedemaekers, C. (2009) Traversing the empty promise: management, subjectivity and the Other's desire. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 22, 181-201.

Hoedemaekers C (2010) Not even semblance: Exploring the interruption of identification with Lacan. *Organization* 17(3): 379–393.

Höpfl, H. (2002) Hitchcock's vertigo and the tragic sublime, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 15(1): 21–34.

Hook, D. (2008) Articulating psychoanalytic and psychosocial studies: Limitations and possibilities. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 30(4), 397-405.

Hook, D. (2011) Psychoanalytic contributions to the political analysis of affect and identification. *Ethnicities*, 11 (1): 107-115.

Islam, G. and Zyphur, M. (2006) The sweetest dreams that labor knows: Robert Frost and the poetics of work. *Management Decision*, 44(4), 526-535).

Jones, C. and Spicer, A. (2005) The sublime object of entrepreneurship, *Organization*, 12: 223–46.

Kenny, K. (2012) Someone big and important: Recognition and affect in an international development workplace. *Organization Studies*, 33(9) 1175–1193

Knights D (2003) Governing through teamwork: Reconstituting subjectivity in a call centre. *Journal of Management Studies* 40(7): 1587–1619.

Knights, D. and Willmott, H. (1989) Power and subjectivity at work: From degradation to subjugation in social relations. *Sociology*, 23(4): 535–558.

Knights, D. and Willmott, H. (1999) *Management lives: Power and identity in work organizations*. London: Sage

Lacan, J. (1975) Freud's papers on technique 1953-1954. In Miller, J.A. (ed.) *The seminar of Jacque Lacan book I*. London: Tavistock/Roudledge.

Lacan, J. (1977) *Ecrit: A selection*. London: Tavistock/Routledge.

Lacan, J. (1988) The ego in Freud's theory and in the technique of psychoanalysis 1954-1955. In Miller, J.A. (ed.) *The seminar of Jacques Lacan book II*. London: Norton.

Lacan, J. (2004) *The Four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac.

Lasch, C. (1980) *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing Expectations*. London Abacus Press.

Linstead, S. (2003) Question time: Notes on altercation. In Westwood, R. and Clegg, S.R. (eds) *Debating organization*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Parker, I. (2005) *Qualitative psychology: Introducing radical research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Patient, D., Lawrence, T.B. and Maitlis, S. (2003) Understanding workplace envy through narrative fiction, *Organization Studies*, 24(7): 1015–44.

Phillips, N. (1995) Telling organizational tales: On the role of narrative fiction in the study of organization. *Organization Studies*, 16(4), 625-649.

Rhodes, C. (2002) Coffee and the business of pleasure: The case of Harbucks vs. Mr. Tweek. *Culture and Organization*, 8(4), 293-306.

Rhodes, C. and Lilley, S. (2012) *Organizations and popular culture: Information, representation and transformation*. London: Routledge.

Rhodes, C. and Westwood, R. (2008) *Critical representations of work and organization in popular culture*. London: Routledge.

Roberts, J. (2005). The power of the 'imaginary' in disciplinary processes. *Organization, 12*, 619–642.

Rössel, B. (2007) Work, recognition, emancipation. In Van Den Brink, B. and Owen, D. (eds.) *Recognition and power: Axel Honneth and the tradition of critical social theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sayers, S. (1998) *Marxism and human nature*. London: Routledge.

Sayers, S. (2005) Why work? Marx and human nature. *Science & Society*, 69(4), 606-616.

Sennett, R. (2008) *The craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shepherdson, C. (2008). *Lacan and the limits of language*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Stavrakakis, Y. (2007) *The Lacanian left*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Stavrakakis, Y. (2008) Peripheral vision: Subjectivity and organized other: Between symbolic authority and fantasmatic enjoyment. *Organization Studies* 29(7): 1037–59.

Stavrakakis, Y. (2010). Symbolic authority, fantasmatic enjoyment and the spirits of capitalism: Genealogies of mutual engagement. In C. Hoedemaekers & C. Cederström (Eds.) *Lacan and organization* (pp. 59–100). London: Mayfly Books.

Willmott, H. (1993) Strength is ignorance; slavery is freedom: Managing culture in modern organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 30(4): 515-552.

Willmott, H. (1994) Theorizing human agency: Responding to the crisis of postmodernity. In Parker, M. and Hassard, J. (eds) *Towards a new theory of organizations*, pp. 87-130. London: Routledge.

Willmott H (2005) Theorizing contemporary control: Some post-structuralist responses to some critical realist questions. *Organization* 12(5): 747–780.